

THE BEVERAGE AND FOOD PRODUCTS ASSESSMENT BY THE INTERNATIONAL TASTE AND QUALITY INSTITUTE (iTQi) AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

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Abstract

The study aimed to analyze the evaluation of beverages and food products by the International Taste and Quality Institute (iTQi), in Europe. These International Awards can be compared to Michelin Stars (similar to the Michelin Guide, iTQi does not organize a competition, but rewards each product for its merits). The working method aimed the analyze of the information collected from iTQi database for the entire period in which there are records (2015, 2016 and 2017) and their processing according to the distinctions obtained for the beverage and food products assessed by the iTQi jury, after a blind evaluation: Diamond Taste Award (DTA), Crystal Taste Award (CTA) and Superior Taste Award (STA). The jury gives each product a certain score (maximum 100 points) after testing, based on the following criteria: appearance, smell, texture, flavor and taste. All products with a minimum score of 70 points are rated as STA and are awarded with one, two or three gold stars, depending on the score achieved. The highest distinction granted by iTQi is represented by DTA (the product analyzed obtaining more than 90 points seven times in the last ten years), followed by CTA (the product analyzed obtaining over 90 points three years in a row). The analysis conducted reveals a slight growth trend of the number of awards granted by iTQi, from 796 awards in 2015 (764 STA, 26 CTA and 6 DTA), to 799 awards in 2016 (765 STA, 30 CTA and 4 DTA) and respectively 833 awards in 2017 (813 STA, 15 CTA and 5 DTA). Romania has so far only gained STA recognition, but to an increasing number of products (seven in 2015, 12 in 2016 and 17 in 2017).

Key words: quality, taste, awards, beverages, food products

INTRODUCTION

International Taste and Quality Institute (iTQi), based in Brussels, Belgium is the world leader regarding testing and promoting high quality food products and beverages [3, 4]. The iTQi Awards are a special international recognition [2], which is focused on the unbiased judgment of 120 sommeliers and chefs [1], being granted since 2005. The Superior Taste Awards is a recognized uncompetitive reward for any drink or food product available in retail trade, the assessment fee being 750-1650 euros (depending on the turnover of the manufacturer). The jury members are selected from the most prestigious 15 associations of European sommelier and chefs such as:

Maîtres Cuisiniers de France, Academy of Culinary Arts, Hellenic Chefs' Association, Académie Culinaire de France, Verband der Köche Deutschlands, Federación de Asociaciones de Cocineros de España, Federazione Dei Cuochi Italiana, Arets Kock of Sweden, Euro-Toques, Gilde Van Nedrlandse Meesterkoks, Professionais de Portugal, Craft Guild of Chefs, Turkish Cooks Association, World Master Chefs Society (WMCS) and Association of Sommellerie Internationale [5]. ITQi has the right to evaluate in accredited laboratories the physico-chemical characteristics of the samples received, to ensure that the products tested have the same quality as those that reach consumers. The products are tested after a blind evaluation, without packaging or other clues; is assigned a unique identification number to each product to ensure a secure tracking system. The products are prepared, heated or cooked in accordance with the

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instructions of the producer and are presented to the jury (as they would have been served at consumer domicile). The jury grant of each product a certain score (maximum 100 points) depending on pleasure felt at tasting, targeting the following criteria: appearance, smell, texture, flavor and taste [5, 6, 7, 8].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The working methodology consisted in analysis of information collected from the iTQi database for the entire period in which there have been records (years 2015, 2016, 2017). For the year 2017 the product testing took place between March and April, the

results were communicated to participants in early May, and the award ceremony took place on June 14th. The hierarchy, processing and synthesis of the data has been achieved according to the distinctions obtained by the beverages and food products evaluated by the iTQi jury: the Diamond Taste Award (DTA), the Crystal Taste Award (CTA), and the Superior Taste Award (STA).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

During the analyzed period, iTQi awarded in the European countries a total of 2428 awards, respectively 796 awards in 2015, 799 prizes in 2016 and 833 in 2017 (Table 1).

Table 1 The awards granted by iTQi between 2015 and 2017 in Europe

No	COUNTRY	TOTAL Awarded Products	%	Years		
				2015	2016	2017
1	GERMANY	361	14.87	116	131	114
2	GREECE	349	14.37	119	109	121
3	SPAIN	298	12.27	74	98	126
4	BELGIUM	289	11.90	102	85	102
5	TURKEY 3%	208	8.57	43	72	93
6	ITALY	182	7.50	59	51	72
7	NETHERLANDS	119	4.90	42	34	43
8	CROATIA	86	3.54	27	36	23
9	UNITED KINGDOM	56	2.31	26	22	8
10	PORTUGAL	54	2.22	20	17	17
11	LITHUANIA	49	2.02	26	17	6
12	POLAND	47	1.94	18	19	10
13	BELARUS	44	1.81	16	16	12
14	ROMANIA	36	1.48	7	12	17
15	RUSSIAN	23	0.95	18	0	5
16	AUSTRIA	23	0.95	5	10	8
17	FRANCE	21	0.86	10	8	3
18	NORWAY	21	0.86	9	3	9
19	SLOVENIA	16	0.66	3	9	4
20	LUXEMBOURG	15	0.62	4	7	4
21	HUNGARY	15	0.62	8	6	1
22	SWEDEN	15	0.62	8	6	1
23	UKRAINE	14	0.58	6	7	1
24	SWITZERLAND	13	0.54	5	2	6
25	FINLAND	13	0.54	2	7	4
26	LATVIA LETONIA	13	0.54	9	4	0
27	SERBIA	12	0.49	5	2	5
28	CYPRUS	10	0.41	2	4	4
29	BOSNIA HERZEGOVINA	8	0.33	4	1	3
30	IRELAND	7	0.29	0	2	5
31	CZECH	4	0.16	3	0	1
32	BULGARIA	3	0.12	0	1	2
33	LIECHTENSTEIN	2	0.08	0	1	1
34	ICELAND	1	0.04	0	0	1
35	SLOVAKIA	1	0.04	0	0	1
TOTAL		2428	100	796	799	833

All products with a minimum score of 70 points are rated as STA and awarded as follows: a gold star for products with "Notable taste" (70-79 points), two gold stars for "Remarkable" products (80-90 points) and three gold stars for the "Exceptional" products (over 90 points). The highest distinction granted by iTQi is DTA (the product analyzed obtained over 90 points,

seven times over the last 10 years) followed by CTA (the product obtained over 90 points, three years in a row).

Following the analysis performed it is noted that over 2/3 (69.5%) of the awards granted by iTQi in European countries were obtained by only six countries (Germany, Greece, Spain, Belgium, Turkey and Italy) of the total of 35 participating countries.

Table 2 The categories of awards granted by iTQi between 2015 and 2017 in Europe

No	COUNTRY	DTA			CTA			STA								
		2015	2016	2017	2015	2016	2017	Exceptional ***			Remarkable **			Notable taste *		
1	Germany	2	1	2	9	10	1	39	38	48	61	75	49	5	7	14
2	Greece	-	-	-	1	3	2	26	23	32	66	64	72	26	19	15
3	Spain	1	3	2	1	4	3	23	32	45	36	52	59	13	7	17
4	Belgium	-	-	-	2	3	2	30	27	37	57	44	45	13	11	18
5	Turkey 3%	-	-	-	1	1	-	4	12	27	32	46	52	6	13	14
6	Italy	2	-	-	4	1	4	21	30	43	27	17	18	5	3	7
7	Netherlands	1	-	-	2	-	-	7	11	17	27	20	22	5	3	4
8	Croatia	-	-	-	-	2	-	5	5	4	10	21	12	12	8	7
9	UK	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	4	4	12	13	4	0	5	0
10	Portugal	-	-	1	-	1	-	5	1	2	11	13	11	4	2	3
11	Lithuania	-	-	-	1	3	-	9	2	2	9	12	3	7	0	1
12	Poland	-	-	-	1	-	1	5	5	3	8	13	5	4	1	1
13	Belarus	-	-	-	1	1	-	3	4	6	12	8	4	0	3	2
14	Romania	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	7	3	10	9	3	0	1
15	Russia	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	0	2	10	0	3	4	0	0
16	Austria	-	-	-	1	-	-	0	2	3	4	7	4	0	1	1
17	France	-	-	-	-	-	1	4	3	0	6	4	2	0	1	0
18	Norway	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	0	1	4	0	5	3	3	3
19	Slovenia	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	0	1	0	6	3	1	3	0
20	Luxembourg	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	1	1	4	6	2	0	0	1
21	Hungary	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	0	6	3	1	0	1	0
22	Sweden	-	-	-	-	1	-	3	2	1	5	3	0	0	0	0
23	Switzerland	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	1	3	2	1	2	1	0	0
24	Finland	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	2	2	2	4	1	0	1	1
25	Latvia	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	0	0	7	3	0	0	1	0
26	Serbia	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	0	1	3	1	2	1	1	2
27	Ukraine	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	3	0	5	4	1	0	0	0
28	Cyprus	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	1	1	1	3	0	1	0
29	Bosnia Herz.	-	-	-	2	-	-	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	1
30	Ireland	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	3	0	0	2	0	2	0
31	Czech	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
32	Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
33	Liechtenstein	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
34	Iceland	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
35	Slovakia	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Categories awards		6	4	5	26	30	15	219	214	296	431	454	402	114	97	115
%		0.25	0.16	0.21	1.1	1.2	0.6	9.0	8.8	12.2	17.8	18.7	16.6	4.7	4.0	4.7
TOTAL		2428														

At the level of the European countries, 15 DTA titles were granted for the analyzed period, these being obtained by only five countries: Spain (six products, respectively 40% of the total) and Germany (five products

- 33.33% of the total) summing both 73.33% of the total, followed by Italy with two products and by the Netherlands and Portugal with one product. In those three years, the total number of products awarded DTA at

European level was close: six in 2015, four in 2016 and five in 2017.

The CTA distinction (for products that have achieved three stars, three years in a row) was granted by iTQi in a much higher number compared to the DTA (71 in total: 26 in 2015, 30 in 2016 and 15 in 2017). The most CTA were obtained by Germany (20), followed by Italy (9), Spain (8), Belgium (7) and Greece (6). It is noted that only these five countries, of the 17 who obtained CTA, hold over 70% of the awards (70.43%): Germany 28.17%, Italy 12.68%, Spain 11.27%, Belgium 9.86% and Greece 8.45%. Lithuania is on the sixth place, with four products (5.63% of the total) followed by Turkey, Bosnia, Netherlands, Croatia, Poland and Belarus with two products

(2.82% for each) and by Austria, France, Sweden, Switzerland and Portugal with one product (1.41% for each).

During the period studied, iTQi awarded 2342 STA distinctions, the most of these (1287, meaning 55%) being granted at the level of the "remarkable" product category (two-star, noted with 80-90 points), with a relatively close number for those three years: 431 in 2015, 454 in 2016, and 402 in 2017.

The next category as percentage (31.1% of the total) was represented of "exceptional" products: 729 products have achieved three stars, respectively over 90 points, with a number of awards significantly higher in the past year (296 in 2017) compared to previous years (219 in 2015, 214 in 2016).

Table 3 Awards granted by iTQi between 2015 and 2017 in Romania

Year	Products	The producer	No. star	No.	%
2015	Zuzu milk 3,5%	Albalact	1	7	19.4
	Cheese of Burduf	Ferma Catean	1		
	Elixir cold pressed sunflower oil	SC Dachim SRL	1		
	Perenna Premier, water	Apollini Company SRL	2		
	Din Ograda, eggs	Aviputna SRL	2		
	Luna Solai cold pressed pumpkin seed oil	TAF PRESOIL SRL	2		
	Ciucaș beer	Ursus Breweries SA	3		
2016	Happy chicken	Agricola International S.A.	2	12	33.3
	Timișoreana beer	Ursus Breweries SA	2		
	Happy Egg	Avicola Lumina S.A.	2		
	Bergenbier ALE beer	Bergenbier S.A.	2		
	The Manole bread	Frontera Trading S.R.L.	2		
	Trutta Dux	Quality Natural	2		
	Sibiu Salami	Salbac S.A.	2		
	Elixir - First Press Rapeseed Oil	SC Dachim SRL	2		
	Elixir - First Press Soybean Oil (Non-GMO)	SC Dachim SRL	2		
	Luna Solai - walnut oil pressed cold	TAF PRESOIL SRL	2		
	AUR'A - Natural Gold Water	AUR'A Mineral Water	3		
	Wembley Dry Gin	Prodal'94	3		
2017	Din Ograda, <i>From yard</i> , eggs	Aviputna SRL	1	17	47.3
	Oloi Tomnit, oil	SC Dachim SRL	1		
	Ostrich Gourmet	Carpathian Ostrich Alliance	2		
	La Fantana - mineral water	La Fantana SRL	2		
	La Fantana - sparkling mineral water	La Fantana SRL	2		
	Perla Moldovei natural alkaline water with pH 8,8	Perla Moldovei Distribution	2		
	Stalinskaya Vodka	Prodal'94	2		
	Stalinskaya Blue Vodka	Prodal'94	2		
	Stalinskaya Silver Vodka	Prodal'94	3		
	Wembley London Dry Gin	Prodal'94	3		
	Luna Solai - rapeseed pressed cold oil	TAF PRESOIL SRL	2		
	Luna Solai - sunflower pressed cold oil	TAF PRESOIL SRL	3		
	AUR'A Natural Gold Water	S.C. Aur'a Mineral Water	3		
	Ciucaș beer	URSUS Breweries SA	3		
	Timișoreana unpasteurized beer	URSUS Breweries SA	2		
	Aqua Carpatica carbonated natural mineral water	Valvis Holding	3		
	Aqua Carpatica non-carbonated natural mineral water	Valvis Holding	3		
Total				36	100

The fewer awards (13.9%) were granted to products with "notable taste" 326 products getting a star, respectively between 70 and 79 points, from which: 114 in 2015, 97 in 2016, and 115 in 2017.

Practically, of the total awarded products by iTQi (in the three years studied), only 0.62% obtained DTA and only 2.92% CTA, most of them 96.5%, obtaining STA.

Romania has received a total of 36 awards: seven awards in 2015 (19.4% of total), 12 awards in 2016 (33.3% of total) and 17 awards in 2017 (47.3% of total); most of them were granted for "remarkable" products (22 products, 61.1%), ten products (27.8%) being appreciated as "exceptional" and four products (11.1%) being considered with "notable taste" (tab. 3).

In the case of Romania, from the seven awarded products in 2015, only one product obtained over 90 points (three stars): Ciucaș beer (Ursus Breweries SA); three products (43% of total) have achieved two stars: Perenna Premier (natural mineral water, SC Apollini Company SRL), Din Ograda (eggs, Aviputna SRL) and Luna Solai (cold-pressed pumpkin seed oil, TAF Presoil SRL), while three other products (also 43%) have obtained a star: Zuzu (milk 3.5% fat, Albalact SA), Cheese of Burduf (Cățean Farm) and Elixir (cold pressed sunflower oil, Dachim SRL).

In the year 2016 from the total of 12 Romanian products awarded, three products received two stars (17%): the beverages Aur'A (Alkaline water with gold and silver ions, AUR'A Mineral Water) and Wembley Dry Gin (Prodal'94); ten products (83%) achieved two stars: Happy chicken (Agricola International S.A.), Happy Egg (Avicola Lumina S.A.), Timisoreana (beer, Ursus Breweries SA), Bergenbier ALE (beer, Bergenbier S.A.), Manole's Bread (Frontera Trading S.R.L.), Trutta Dux, (trout pate, Quality Natural), Sibiu Salami (Salbac S.A.), Elixir rapeseed oil (first press oil, Dachim SRL), Elixir soybean oil (first release oil, of soybeans genetically unmodified, Dachim SRL) and Luna Solai (Cold-pressed walnut oil, TAF Presoil SRL.).

In 2017, from those 17 Romanian products awarded, seven products (41% of the total) obtained three stars: Aqua Carpatica (natural

carbonated mineral water and flat natural mineral water, Valvis Holding), Stalinskaya Silver Vodka (Prodal'94), Wembley London Dry Gin (Prodal'94), Luna Solai (cold pressed sunflower oil, TAF Presoil SRL), Aur'A (water with gold and silver ion, alkaline, Aur'A Mineral Water), Ciucas (beer, URSUS Breweries SA), while a number of eight product (47%) have obtained two stars: Luna Solai (cold pressed rapeseed oil, TAF Presoil SRL), Timisoreana (unpasteurized beer Ursus Breweries SA), Ostrich Gourmet (Ostrich meat, Ostrich Carpathian Alliance), La Fantana, (flat mineral water and carbonated mineral water, La Fantana SRL), Perla Moldovei (natural mineral water with pH 8,8, Perla Moldovei Distribution) Stalinskaya Vodka (Prodal'94) and Stalinskaya Blue Vodka (Prodal'94).

The information provided by iTQi are appreciated by the participating companies, these analyzing in detail the results of tests, both with the aim of improving quality or of product diversification, as well as promotional tools in marketing campaigns, but also for negotiating the selling price of the products. Sensory analysis reports are valuable tools used by those involved in the activity of research-development and product quality control, these being steadily looking independent and documented opinions provided by professionals.

CONCLUSIONS

For those three years take in the study is observed at European level a growth trend of the number of products awarded, especially for 2017 (34 products awarded in addition compared to 2016). Most of the prizes (around 70%) awarded by iTQi in the European countries were obtained by only six countries (Germany, Greece, Spain, Belgium, Turkey and Italy) of the total of 35 participating countries. Romania has recorded significant growth, from year to year, of the number of awarded products (from seven products in 2015 to 12 products in 2016 and 17 products in 2017). It is also noted, the tendency of most European producers to participate with more products.

ITQi awards is a distinction that certifies the superior quality of beverages and food

products and contributes to attracting attention and gaining consumer confidence. The increasing number of participating products annually expresses the interest of producers and the fact that they use these distinctions as ways of promoting and attesting the quality of the products realized.

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